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*Paragon of Discipleship? Simon of Cyrene in the Markan Passion Narrative*

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καὶ ἀγγαρεύουσιν παράγοντά τινα Σίμωνα Κυρηναῖον ἐρχόμενον ἀπ’ ἀγροῦ,  
τὸν πατέρα Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ Ρούφου, ἵνα ἄρῃ τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ.

And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from  
the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. (Mark  
15.21)

As Jesus begins his journey to Golgotha in Mark’s gospel, we are introduced to a new character: Simon of Cyrene. He bursts into the narrative amidst a wealth of detail, carries Jesus’ cross to the place of execution, and disappears as quickly as he appeared (Mk 15.21). Church tradition has tended to treat Simon sympathetically. At least from the time of Origen he has commonly been seen as a paragon of discipleship. His act of kindness towards Jesus was later remembered in the Stations of the Cross; and Christian art and reflection have fondly remembered his act of service. More recently, Jesus films delight in the character of Simon, casting his actions as a brief moment of devotion in a generally bleak landscape. Cecil B. De Mille’s *King of Kings*, for example, has Simon volunteer his help, urged on by a small child. Not only does Simon save Jesus from the Roman lash, but he takes his hand and lifts the cross with a smile. The words ‘I will bear Thy cross, Friend’ are emblazoned across the screen, rather curiously attributed to Mk 15.21.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Simon volunteers to help and carries the cross alongside Jesus. As

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<sup>1</sup> *King of Kings*, 1927; the part of Simon was played by William Boyd.

he watches the crucifixion, we see his tear-stained cheeks.<sup>2</sup> Even when Simon is pressed into service, as is the case in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, an initially reluctant Simon cannot help but be moved by the man he is forced to help.<sup>3</sup> This positive assessment runs into much modern scholarship, too, where Simon is seen as the first to take up his cross, often in contrast to the feckless twelve who have all conspicuously run away (Mk 14.50).<sup>4</sup>

The homiletic value of these readings is clear, and it is arguably the case that the *Lukan* Simon is to be seen as an example of discipleship.<sup>5</sup> But what of Mark? Did this evangelist intend Simon to be characterized in such a way? Put differently, does the rhetoric of the narrative at this point guide the interpreter towards a particularly positive assessment of Simon and his actions, or something else entirely? In the following essay I shall suggest that Simon does not function as an exemplar of discipleship for Mark, that that role belongs firmly to Jesus, the central character of the *bios*, and that Simon's main function in the text is to highlight Jesus' kingship. First, though, it will be worth looking at why the view of Simon as disciple *par excellence* has been so popular.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965; the part of Simon was played by Sidney Poitier.

<sup>3</sup> *The Passion of the Christ*, 2004; the part of Simon was played by Jarreth Merz.

<sup>4</sup> In the more secular world, Simon's name has become a byword for one who helps another, even inspiring the Cyrenian charity. The Edinburgh Cyrenians give the following as their philosophy: 'Where one of us stumbles, the other will wait, lift their neighbour up again and once again walk on together'; see their website, [www.cyrenian.org.uk/about\\_cyrenians/](http://www.cyrenian.org.uk/about_cyrenians/) (accessed 12/1/2015).

<sup>5</sup> See the monograph by S. B. Crowder, *Simon of Cyrene: A Case of Roman Conscription* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), which describes him as a 'disciple par excellence' in Luke's gospel (p.xii). For a different view, see S. Bøe, *Cross-Bearing in Luke* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), especially pp. 198-220.

### *Paradigm of Discipleship*

Almost everything about Simon is uncertain. Is he Jewish or Gentile? Has he relocated to Jerusalem on a permanent basis, or is he in the holy city only for the Passover? Has he just come from the country (i.e. from Cyrene), or from the field (i.e. from his work)? And were either of these two activities acceptable on the Day of Passover? Scholars have pondered all of these questions, and have offered a range of possible answers.<sup>6</sup> What is quite clear, however, is the fact that he carried Jesus' cross (σταυρός), or more accurately, the crossbeam (*patibulum* in Latin), which the condemned man himself would normally be compelled to drag to the place of execution.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Simon is seen as *Jewish* by J. Marcus (*Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York/London: Doubleday, 2000], p.1041) and A. Y. Collins (*Mark: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], pp.735-6) and *Gentile* by C. Myers (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988], p.385). He is seen as a *Cyrenian settler* in Jerusalem by Collins (*Mark*, pp.735-6) and coming in from *work* by G. Theissen (*The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992], p.167). On the difficulties with Markan chronology at this point, see my article, 'Dating the Death of Jesus: Memory and the Religious Imagination', *NTS* 59 (2013), pp.461-75.

<sup>7</sup> This was normal Roman practice, see Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 4.2.7; Plutarch, *Moralia* 554 A/B; Plautus, *Carbonaria* 2; Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 2.56. As R. E. Brown points out, the words for cross and crossbeam were interchangeable, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1994), p.913 (citing Seneca, *De vita beata* 19.3 and Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.3).

To some, Simon's actions echo Jesus' words in Mk 8.34, where he declares to the crowd: 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross (σταυρός) and follow me'. These words are a graphic summary of Jesus' teaching on discipleship throughout the gospel, which has consistently stressed the need for self-sacrificial service, for those who are first to put themselves last, and for followers not to behave as others do (Mk 8.33-9.1, 10.35-45).<sup>8</sup> 'Cross-carrying', then, seems to epitomise what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and to represent the ultimate way of following his example. It is hardly surprising, then, that many scholars praise Simon's actions here, regarding him as an example of 'cross-bearing discipleship', and his service as a 'paradigmatic act'.<sup>9</sup> In a recent lengthy treatment, Brian K. Blount argues that Simon in Mark 'provides an illustrative example of a "disciple" doing as Jesus commanded in ch. 8', and that he functions as 'a model worthy of imitation in the Markan community'.<sup>10</sup> Some have gone even further, arguing that Simon was created by the evangelist specifically to illustrate Mk 8.34, and to do what another Simon – Simon Peter – could not.<sup>11</sup>

Narrative critics have seen Simon's act as part of a wider pattern. In their seminal work, David Rhoads and Donald Michie argued that minor characters in Mark 'consistently

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<sup>8</sup> See K. E. Brower, "'We are Able,'" Cross-bearing Discipleship and the Ways of the Lord in Mark', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 29 (2007), pp.177-201.

<sup>9</sup> So J. Marcus, *Mark*, p.1048 and B. Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p.394, n.145.

<sup>10</sup> B. K. Blount, 'A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Simon of Cyrene: Mark 15.21 and its Parallels', *Semeia* 64 (1993), pp.171-98 (178).

<sup>11</sup> So S. Reinach, 'Simon de Cyrene', in *Cultes, Myths et Religions* (Paris: Leroux, 1904-23), 5 vols, 4:181-8; R. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: the Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), pp.154-5, 261, 360.

exemplify the values of the rule of God'.<sup>12</sup> The actions of these characters become particularly prominent within the passion narrative where, in addition to Simon, we meet a number of other figures: the woman who anoints Jesus for burial (Mk 14.3-9), the centurion who confesses Jesus as Son of God (Mk 15.39), and Joseph of Arimathaea who courageously asks for the body of Jesus and gives him a decent burial (Mk 15.42-6). Noting the earlier flight of the twelve, Bas van Iersel observes that these minor characters 'are people who act in the right way where Jesus' supporters fail. Do not they rather than the disciples play the role readers of the book might wish to imitate?'<sup>13</sup>

For the majority of literary critics, Simon and other minor characters take the place of the fearful and increasingly baffled disciples who have all abandoned Jesus at his arrest or shortly afterwards. Unlike the twelve, however, these bit-part players instinctively understand what discipleship means, and so can be held up as examples to Mark's audience.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp.129-35 (129). A similar view is taken in the third edition published in 2012 (now with J. Dewey), see pp.130-35. Simon and others are named in the Passion Narrative, we are told, to emphasize 'that people achieve their full identity in acts of service', p.133.

<sup>13</sup> B. van Iersel, *Reading Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), p.188. For the scholars considered here, 'minor characters' are those who appear only once in the narrative; the women at the burial and the tomb, therefore, are not included.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, E. S. Malbon, 'The Major Importance of the Minor Characters in Mark', in E. S. Malbon, *New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp.58-86; J. F. Williams, 'Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark's Gospel', *Biblioteca Sacra* 153 (1996), pp.332-43; A. E. Gardner mentions Simon in passing (p.46) and appears to regard him as one who removes obstacles from the way of

### *Flies in the Ointment*

There are, however, a number of difficulties with this interpretation. Most important is Mark's use of the word ἀγγαρεύω, meaning to conscript, or to press into service. Originally a Persian term relating to the royal post, by Roman times it had come to denote the requisitioning of any kind of civil or military service, including carrying soldiers' packs and offering hospitality or supplies. The same word is used in Mt. 5.42, where it clearly refers to a hostile and unwelcome demand to render service to the governor's troops.<sup>15</sup> Mark's use of this word clearly suggests that Simon was *forced* to carry the cross by the Roman soldiers – and also implies, presumably, that it was not an arrangement about which he was altogether happy. It is difficult, then, to see Simon's action as an example of voluntarily 'taking up' the cross. In further reference to Mk 8.34, we might also note that there is no indication that Simon has denied himself in any way, nor does he bear his *own* cross (despite later Gnostic interpretations<sup>16</sup>). In the end, Mk 8.34 and the present passage share a number of key words (σταυρός and αἶρω being the most important), but the circumstances of Simon's actions seem far removed from the ideals of discipleship outlined by Jesus. In fact, we might even say that they are an ironic twist on Mk 8.34 (a point we shall come back to later).

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Jesus (building on Mk 1.2-3), though he does not discuss him in any depth, 'Reading Between the Texts: Minor Characters who Prepare the Way for Jesus', *Encounter* 66 (2005), pp.45-66.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller account, see J. D. M. Derrett, 'Law in the New Testament: The Palm Sunday Colt', *Nov. T* 13 (1971), pp.241-58, especially pp. 243-4; Crowder, *Simon*, pp.69-77.

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus attributes to Basilides the idea that Simon was crucified in place of Jesus (*Against Haeresies* 1.24.4).

It is worth pointing out that not all scholars see Mark's use of ἀγγαρεύω as problematic. While most promoters of the 'Simon as example' reading pass over it in silence, Blount turns Simon's conscription into a virtue: 'As Simon was compelled by higher authorities and had no choice, so will they (Mark's audience) be compelled. For a believer there is no choice: to affirm Jesus will be to risk the reality of the cross.'<sup>17</sup>

In a quite different vein, Gregory the Great in the late sixth century saw Simon as a negative example of someone whose outward actions were praiseworthy (he carried the cross) but who lacked any real inner commitment (he was forced to do it).<sup>18</sup> Few nowadays would derive quite the same morals from the story as Gregory, but a reasonable number of interpreters do resist seeing Simon as a positive example, largely because of the element of compulsion in his story. The reason for Simon's inclusion in the account for these scholars is not because Mark wanted to make a point about discipleship, but simply for historical reasons. Simon really had carried Jesus' cross; his name featured in the earliest passion narratives and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, were known to Mark's audience and could be called upon to verify the story. Hence Simon's act was forever linked with the story of Jesus' execution.<sup>19</sup>

A second odd feature of the narrative at this point, and one not often remarked upon by narrative critics, is that Simon is not the principal focus of attention. He is clearly the

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<sup>17</sup> Blount, 'Socio-Rhetorical', p.178.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in M. DelCogliano, 'Gregory the Great on Simon of Cyrene: A Critique of Tradition', *Annali di Storia Dell-Esegesi* 28 (2011), pp.315-24.

<sup>19</sup> So G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), pp.166-99; Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp.944, 954; Brown, *Death*, pp.913-4.



subject of the subjunctive verb ἄρῃ (loosely meaning ‘carry’ or ‘take up’ here), but the prime movers in the scene are the Roman guards, the unspecified ‘they’ of ἀγγαρεύουσιν, those who mocked him in the previous paragraph (Mk 15.15-20) and who will take him to Golgotha, offer him myrrered wine, crucify him and divide his clothing in the following scenes (Mk 15.22-24). The dominant verb within this whole section is ‘crucify’ (σταυρόω):

in Mk 15.15 Pilate determines the sentence (‘he delivered him to be *crucified*’) and the soldiers act on his order

in v. 20 they lead him out ‘to *crucify* him’

in v. 24 they *crucify* him

in v. 25 we are told that it was the third hour ‘when they *crucified* him’

in v. 27 they *crucify* a bandit on either side of Jesus.

Thus, despite the wealth of detail surrounding Simon, his story is all but engulfed by the inexorable march of the executioners to Golgotha, and by their relentless desire to crucify their prisoner.

If Simon were being cast as an exemplary disciple, we might expect him to take on more of an active role, perhaps to offer his services to the executioners (as, in fact, he tends to do in Jesus films). Other minor characters in the passion narrative *do* take the initiative – the anointing woman comes to Jesus and breaks her costly oil over his head (Mk 14.3-9); the centurion responds to what he has seen from his vantage point opposite the cross (Mk 15.39); and Joseph of Arimathaea bravely confronts Pilate with his request for the body (Mk 15.42-46). In contrast, Simon’s role simply forms part of a catalogue of actions perpetrated by the *soldiers* upon the now passive Jesus.

And this leads to our third and final curious feature of the narrative: the fact that Mark does not give any reason *why* Simon needs to be brought into the narrative at this point.

Commentators overwhelmingly assume that the soldiers’ brutal flogging in Mk 15.15 has left

Jesus in such a weakened state that he cannot manage the crossbeam himself. Such a reading fits nicely with the note that Jesus is brought (or even dragged, depending on the force of φέρω, v. 22<sup>20</sup>) by the soldiers to the place of execution, and his remarkably quick death (such that Pilate seems surprised, Mk 15.44).<sup>21</sup> This interpretation also offers an easy way to harmonise Mark with the account in John, where Jesus carries his own cross with no assistance from Simon or anyone else (Jn 19.17). The resulting harmonized narrative would have Jesus managing on his own for a while (John's account), before weakness overcame him and Simon is forced to help (Mark's account).<sup>22</sup>

This reading is not impossible. Mark's style is terse, and the evangelist may expect his audience to interpret Simon's help as a concession to Jesus' weakness. Given their previous behaviour, the soldiers would presumably be acting not out of pity or sympathy, but more

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<sup>20</sup> Marcus would not exclude the literal meaning of φέρω here, i.e. 'carry', *Mark* p. 1042; but see the analysis of C. H. Turner who points to Mark's rather widespread and general use of this verb, generally denoting little more than 'bring', reprinted in J.K. Elliott (ed), *The Language and Style of the Gospel of Mark: An Edition of C. H. Turner's 'Notes on Marcan Usage' Together with Other Comparable Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp.13-15.

<sup>21</sup> W. S. Campbell argues that Jesus *refused* to carry his own cross at this point, 'Engagement, Disengagement and Obstruction: Jesus' Defence Strategies in Mark's Trial and Execution Scenes (14.53-64; 15.1-39)', *JSNT* 26 (2004), pp.283-300. While Campbell is right to note that Mark has not previously given the impression that Jesus' flogging was particularly severe, I do not find his overall arguments here convincing.

<sup>22</sup> The earliest articulation of this is usually traced back to Jerome, *Comm. On Matt.* 27.32 (see DelCogliano, 'Gregory', p.318, n.14 for further patristic discussion). In fact, rather than allowing an easy harmonization, John's insistence that Jesus carried his own cross sounds more like a conscious refutation of Mark's account.

likely from fear that their over-enthusiastic beating might extinguish the prisoner before Pilate's sentence of crucifixion could be carried out. Yet the point remains that Mark gives no hint of such motives, and we are by no means forced to accept this interpretation. A much more likely reading, however, would be one in which the conscription of Simon is seen as a *hostile act*, more specifically, an act of mockery perpetrated by the soldiers against Jesus. Two considerations bolster this view – (1) the general narrative context, and (2), Roman crucifixionary practices.

(1) The whole narrative context of the Simon story has been dominated by mockery: Jesus is mocked as a false prophet immediately after the Jewish trial (Mk 14.65); sneered at by Pilate as the 'King of the Jews'<sup>23</sup>; parodied by the soldiers as a mock-Emperor (Mk 15.16-20); and lampooned on the cross by onlookers, the chief priests and those crucified with him (Mk 15.29-32). Even the *titulus* needs to be seen as part of this sustained mockery (Mk 15.26). Nor is there any indication of a softening on the part of Jesus' executioners throughout these verses. The wine mixed with myrrh in Mk 15.23 is often interpreted as an act of clemency, offering an analgesic to deaden the pain,<sup>24</sup> but this seems out of character with the jeering

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<sup>23</sup> See my book, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), pp.105-16.

<sup>24</sup> For this interpretation, see for example Marcus, *Mark*, p.1042 (he suggests, improbably in my view, that Pilate ordered special consideration to be given to this prisoner, p.1043). There may be some confusion here with the note in the Talmud which mentions women of Jerusalem offering wine mixed with frankincense to people about to die (*b.Sanh* 43a); quite apart from the late date of the text (probably fourth century), Mark's narrative has soldiers, not women offer the wine, and the Talmud mentions frankincense, not myrrh. Interestingly, *King of Kings* also promotes this sympathetic reading, displaying a placard reading: 'And

cohort of Mk 15.16-20. More importantly, a recent article by a biblical scholar, a botanist and a doctor has argued strongly (and to my mind persuasively) that this was part of the torture. Myrrh made the wine impossible to drink, and to offer it to a man suffering from excessive dehydration (as would be the case with someone recently flogged) could only be with the purpose of enhancing his suffering.<sup>25</sup> The whole of Mark 15.16-27, then, is dominated by themes of mockery, suffering and cruelty. There is nothing here that would encourage us to look for clemency on the part of the soldiers (even if of a self-serving nature). In fact, it is the very bleakness of the scene which will make the centurion's words in v.39 so striking.

(2) Historically, this mixture of gratuitous brutality and ridicule makes good sense.

Conscripting another person to carry the crossbeam would have struck Mark's audience as unusual, and if they imagined Simon to be Jewish, his forced association with an execution on the Day of Passover would no doubt be shocking.<sup>26</sup> But these were people familiar with crucifixion in all its gory manifestations. They would know that the public nature of the cross was designed not only to act as a deterrent but also to provide spectacle and even entertainment to the onlookers. In Martin Hengel's words, 'crucifixion was a punishment in

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they gave him to drink, wine mingled with myrrh wherewith to lessen his pain – but He received it not,' ascribing the quotation to Mk 15.23!

<sup>25</sup> E. Koskenniemi, K. Nisula and J. Toppari, 'Wine Mixed with Myrrh (Mark 15.23) and *Crurifragium* (John 19.31-32): Two details of the Passion Narratives', *JSNT* 27 (2005), pp.379-91. The details reminded Matthew of Ps. 69.21, hence his slightly altered wording (Mt. 27.34).

<sup>26</sup> Josephus claims that Rome did not force subjects to transgress their national laws (*Apion* 2.73), though his own works show that reality did not always match aspiration.

which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full reign'.<sup>27</sup> And this is amply illustrated by the sources. Josephus talks of the jesting soldiers after the fall of Jerusalem who took out their hatred of the prisoners by nailing them to crosses in different postures. Tacitus notes the derision that accompanied the crucifixion of Christians as punishment for the fire of Rome. And other writers comment on victims nailed through their private parts, hung on ridiculously high crosses to match their high status, or crucified amidst theatrical shows.<sup>28</sup> The mockery, of course, made the victim an object of ridicule and enhanced his humiliation and shame (thereby performing an important sociological function in creating a sense of distance between the crucified and the onlookers, and encouraging the crowd to identify with the upholders of justice<sup>29</sup>). When the crucified was a brigand or a rebel leader, as in the case of Jesus, the mockery might be particularly severe, as the soldiers poked fun at his

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<sup>27</sup> M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London, SCM, 1977), p.25.

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *War* 5.2 (on the jesting soldiers); Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.4 (on the execution of Christians); Philo, *Flacc.* 72.84-5 (on Jews crucified in the Alexandrian arena as entertainment); Plato, *Gorg.* 473 bc (on a would-be tyrant mutilated prior to crucifixion); Seneca, *Marc.* 6.20.3 (on people impaled through their private parts); Chariton, *Chaer.* 4.2.7 (where two prisoners are chained together at the feet and the neck, each carrying his own cross, as an example to others).

<sup>29</sup> K. M. Coleman, 'Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythical Enactments', *JRS* 80 (1990), 44-73; V. M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.28-31, C. Epplert, 'Spectacular Executions in the Roman World', in P. Christesen and G. Kyle (eds), *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Wiley Blackwells, 2013), pp.520-32.

pretensions in a particularly grotesque way.<sup>30</sup> Although not linked to an execution, we might consider in this context Philo's account of the ridicule of Carabas at the hands of the Alexandrian mob in the governorship of Flaccus (32-38 CE). In an attempt to lampoon King Agrippa I, who was visiting the city, the poor man was taken to the gymnasium, dressed in mock kingly regalia, and hailed as King in an episode highly reminiscent of Mk 15.16-20.<sup>31</sup>

When we analyse Mk 15.21 carefully, then, we are left with a rather disturbing scene in which Simon's involvement raises more questions than it answers. Who does he actually help - Jesus or the executioners? Would he be proud of his actions later, or ashamed at his part in the proceedings? And if Alexander and Rufus were known in some way to Mark's audience, did they become Christians *because* of their father, or *despite* him? Did they perhaps bear the shame of their father's involvement in Jesus' execution rather like Paul did his earlier antagonism, or Peter his denial? Whatever the answers to these questions, Simon's role in the drama remains highly ambiguous.

I propose that the reason why Simon's actions are hard to make sense of is because we are focussing on the wrong person. It is only when we direct our gaze onto Jesus, the subject of Mark's *bios*, that Simon's role begins to make sense. In order to appreciate this, we need a short detour into the genre of the gospel and its characterization of Jesus more generally.

### *Jesus as the Paradigm of Discipleship in Mark*

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<sup>30</sup> On the cross as parody, see J. Marcus, 'Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation', *JBL* 125 (2006), pp.73-8; also my own essay, 'You'll Probably Get away with Crucifixion': Laughing at the Cross in the *Life of Brian* and the Ancient World', in Joan E. Taylor (ed.), *Jesus and Brian* (T & T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2015), forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> Philo, *Flaccus* 36-9.

After much discussion of gospel genre in the 1980s and 90s, a clear scholarly consensus now regards Mark as an ancient biography (a *bios*, or life of Jesus). Like all genres, of course, *bioi* were fluid and wide-ranging, often pushing at the boundaries of generic constraint and exhibiting a variety of purposes and styles.<sup>32</sup> What they all had in common, however, was a concern with the study of a man's character. As Richard Burridge notes: 'They aimed to establish the essence of an individual, and by doing so to offer a moral paradigm for readers to emulate.'<sup>33</sup> Lucian of Samosata puts this clearly in the introduction to his biography of the philosopher Demonax:

'It is now fitting to tell of Demonax for two reasons – that he may be retained in your memory by men of culture as far as I can bring it about, and that young men of good instinct who aspire to philosophy may not have to shape themselves by ancient precedents alone, but may be able to set themselves a pattern from our modern world and copy that man, the best of all philosophers whom I know about.'<sup>34</sup>

Imitation, then, was the central purpose of biography, to hold up the lives of great men as inspirational examples of virtue (or, occasionally, dangerous examples of vice) in an effort to encourage appropriate ethical behaviour amongst the audience. This was particularly useful in the case of philosophers, where biographies had the ability to open up a personal

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<sup>32</sup> See the excellent study by T. Hägg, *The Art of Biography* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> On the range of purposes exhibited by *bioi*, see R. A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn), pp. 145-7.

<sup>34</sup> Lucian, *Demonax* 1-2; see the similar sentiments in Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 1, *Pericles* 1-2, and *Demetrius* 1.4-6; on this theme in Plutarch more generally, see T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (OUP, 1999), p.4.

connection between the philosopher and the would-be pupil. In this way, as David Capes notes:

one could become a ‘disciple’ or ‘follower’ without personal association with a great teacher. Through the study and imitation of their words and deeds contained in writings about them (particularly those that are well composed), one can know what kind of teachers they are and ultimately become like them.<sup>35</sup>

Although Mark’s work would have struck pagan readers as rather unusual (not least for its assumption of Jewish monotheism, its apocalyptic worldview, and its biblical turn of phrase), his gospel does conform to this two-fold pattern. The evangelist is interested both in exploring the identity of Jesus (as the Christ, the Son of Man, the royal Son of God) and at the same time establishing his central character as a model for others to imitate. The call to ‘follow me’ is frequent (Mk 1.17, 8.34, 10.21, [10.28, 52]), and discipleship is primarily through following the example of Jesus, whether that was in prayerful obedience to the Father, faith in God’s providence, or service to others.<sup>36</sup>

On his journey to Jerusalem with his disciples, Jesus outlines the theory of discipleship, what it means for the first to be last, to deny oneself, to give up everything (including possessions and family), and to take up one’s cross (Mk 8.22-10.52). It is clear from these chapters that Jesus will die (Mk 8.31, 9.31, 10.33-4), a death that he views as a

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<sup>35</sup> D. B. Capes, ‘*Imitatio Christi* and the Gospel Genre’, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13 (2003), pp.1-19 (7).

<sup>36</sup> See discussions in R. A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp.159-85.



logical extension of the demands of discipleship (Mk 10.42-45).<sup>37</sup> Chapter 13 outlines what Donald Senior terms the ‘passion of the community.’<sup>38</sup> It now becomes clear that the followers of Jesus will also be handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues and forced to stand before governors and kings for the sake of their beliefs. They will be betrayed by their closest friends and hated by all, but the Markan Jesus urges them to put their trust in the Holy Spirit, to stand firm and – most emphatically of all – to be vigilant (Mk 13.33, 35, 37).

In view of this chapter, and a number of other references in the gospel, most scholars assume that Mark was written to a Christian group which had experienced some kind of persecution, or feared that it might become the victim of Roman reprisals in the near future.<sup>39</sup> In such a setting, it would be important to present Jesus not only predicting that suffering might be necessary, but also as a model for his suffering followers to emulate. And this is exactly what the evangelist does. In the passion narrative, the theory of discipleship outlined in the central section becomes reality in a life lived to its very end according to the arduous and all-encompassing demands of the gospel. We are presented with a Jesus who, in a time of great distress, turns to the father in prayer at Gethsemane, who is quickly reconciled to his

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<sup>37</sup> On the meaning of the death of Jesus in Mark, see M. D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp.47-67; also Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, pp.113-5; and S. E. Dowd and E. S. Malbon, ‘The Significance of Jesus’ Death in Mark: Narrative Context and Authorial Audience’, *JBL* 125 (2006), pp.271-97.

<sup>38</sup> D. Senior, ‘The Death of Jesus and the Meaning of Discipleship’, in J. T. Carroll and J. B. Green (eds), *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 234-55 (238).

<sup>39</sup> See in particular Mk 8.34, 10.39, 13.9. On persecution, see H. Roskam, *The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp.27-74.

impending death, and who is alert to the presence of evil at the hour of his arrest. We see him answer both the High Priest and Pilate robustly, despite the danger of the situation. And we see his trust in God on the cross, even when the power of death threatens to overwhelm him and God appears to be far from the narrative. The authoritative, powerful, witty Jesus of the first half of the gospel becomes increasingly passive in these final chapters. After Mk 15.2 he speaks no more until his final cry of abandonment on the cross, and the omniscient narrator no longer gives us an insight into his thoughts or feelings. As Jesus endures the depths of human despair, articulated through the language of LXX Ps. 21, the audience can only imagine the horror of what he endures.<sup>40</sup>

Other characters in this tightly spun account act merely as foils to Jesus, largely to enhance his dignity and courage (again a common feature of biographical narrative).<sup>41</sup> Most notable here are the twelve disciples, Jesus' most intimate, hand-picked men who, despite their proximity to their master, are completely unable to follow him. Modern critics often judge the twelve harshly, but this should not be pushed too far. The evangelist wants to show that discipleship requires total commitment, and whether it is their lack of readiness in Gethsemane, their flight at the arrest, or Peter's denial in the high priest's courtyard, the primary function of the failure of the twelve is to highlight *Jesus' unwavering resolution and*

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<sup>40</sup> On the character of Jesus, particularly in the face of death, see Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, pp.111-5.

<sup>41</sup> For discussion of this plot device, see E. Best, 'The Role of the Disciples in Mark' *NTS* 23 (1976-7), pp.377-401; W. Shiner, *Follow Me! Disciples in Markan Rhetoric* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); S. S. Elliott, "'Witless in your own Cause': Divine Plots and Fractured Characters in the Life of Aesop and the Gospel of Mark', *Religion and Theology* 12 (2005), pp.397-418.

*obedience to God's will*.<sup>42</sup> Jesus goes to the cross alone in Mark, quite simply, because he is the only one able to do so. Only he can endure to the bitter end, only he is able to face the terrifying power of evil, and only he will be raised again by God.<sup>43</sup> At this stage in the narrative, no one else - not Peter, nor the rest of the twelve, nor any other person - could follow his lead. Later on, however, after the resurrection and the appearance of the risen Lord in 'Galilee', the disciples will be able to follow him (as no doubt many in Mark's audience knew). The disappearance of the twelve from the passion narrative, then, does not create a 'gap' in discipleship which needs to be filled by minor characters. The focus throughout is on Jesus, the perfect example of a life of discipleship.

Despite his interest in presenting Jesus as a model to be emulated, however, Mark has not set aside the question of Jesus' identity. Lying behind the mockery and derision of chapter 15 is a powerful irony: Jesus really is the King for those with eyes to see.<sup>44</sup> The title 'King' is used six times in this chapter (Mk 15.2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32) and Jesus is mocked for his kingly pretensions three times – by Pilate (Mk 15.6-15), by soldiers (Mk 15.16-20a), and by chief

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<sup>42</sup> So also R. A. Burridge, 'Reading the Gospels as Biography', in B. McGing and J.

Mossman (eds), *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006), pp.31-49, esp. pp.34-35. J. Dewey similarly notes that the negative portrayal of the disciples would probably have been taken much less seriously by a listening first century audience than a modern one accustomed to literary texts, 'Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience', *CBQ* (1991), pp.221-36 (235-6).

<sup>43</sup> M. A. Tolbert, 'How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character', *Interpretation* 47 (1993), pp.347-57 (356); D. Senior, *Death*, p.241.

<sup>44</sup> J. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp.171-7 on the passion narrative.

priests and scribes (Mk 15.31-2).<sup>45</sup> Mark's paradoxical narrative points to the glory and dignity of Jesus, showing that the crucified Christ is indeed King of the Jews. What looked to an outsider to be the depths of suffering, humiliation and even rejection was in reality the triumph of God's son – a fact acknowledged (albeit unwittingly) by the centurion at the cross (Mk 15.39).<sup>46</sup>

When we put the focus back onto Jesus, the royal Son of God who dies as a model for followers, what does the role of Simon look like?

*A certain Simon from Cyrene – again*

The details supplied by Mark identify Simon as an *outsider*. He is from Cyrene, the capital of the North African province of Cyrenaica (modern Libya),<sup>47</sup> The designation 'a certain' (τις) suggests that he was previously an unknown figure,<sup>48</sup> and the fact that he has come in from the field/country suggests that he is neither a follower nor an opponent of Jesus, but rather a neutral character who happens to be standing near to the *praetorium*. The reference to the fields (ἀπ' ἀγροῦ), however, recalls another procession - the much more joyful entry into

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<sup>45</sup> See F. J. Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); Bond, *Pilate*, pp.100-1.

<sup>46</sup> For the centurion, Jesus is presumably a hero or demi-God, though Mark's audience of course interpret the words in their full Christian sense. See J. Pobee, 'The Cry of the Centurion – a Cry of Defeat', in E. Bammel (ed.), *The Trial of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1970), pp.91-102.

<sup>47</sup> He may perhaps be black, though that is more difficult to establish; so also Blount, 'Socio-Rhetorical', pp.179-80. The casting of black actor Sidney Poitier in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* upholds this tradition.

<sup>48</sup> Theissen, *Gospels*, p.177, n.25.

Jerusalem in Mk 11.1-11, where those caught up in the drama cut leafy branches from the fields to line Jesus' path (there ἐκ τῶν ἄγρῶν).<sup>49</sup> Together, these two processions frame the Jerusalem narrative. The one leading into the city is full of joy and hope, looking towards a Davidic kingdom, the other, going out of the city, is an ignominious trudge to the cross, characterised by mockery and derision. And yet, there are thematic links between the two processions which we would do well to consider.

Both processions start with conscription. In a relatively lengthy description at the start of ch. 11, Jesus assumes the role of an occupying ruler. He sends two disciples to bring him a colt, which presumably he has no right to take. The lofty 'The Lord has need of it' may well mimic the hated practice of requisitioning which will come to the fore in the Simon narrative. Jesus' entry into the holy city, amid the crowds strewing their garments before him and singing their acclamations, imitates the entrance processions of Graeco-Roman kings and triumphal warriors – a feature which would have been well known to Mark's audience. Yet the evangelist quickly subverts any expectations his audience might have: rather than claim his city, the kingly ruler simply leaves (Mk 11.11), and instead of inaugurating his rule through purging the Temple, he returns the next day and announces its destruction.<sup>50</sup> None of this should be a surprise to the attentive reader of Mk 10.35-45: true kingly rule both for Christ and those who would imitate him lies not in grand entries and important seats, or

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<sup>49</sup> I owe this link to C. Myers, *Binding*, p.385, though I am less convinced that Mark wants to underscore a 'geopolitical/spatial tension between the city/country'. Interestingly, *The Passion of the Christ* also juxtaposes the two processions – Jesus remembers his earlier, joyful procession as he makes his way to the cross.

<sup>50</sup> P. D. Duff, 'The March of the Divine Warrior and the Advent of the Greco-Roman King: Mark's Account of Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem', *JBL* 111 (1992), pp.55-71 - with many references to Graeco-Roman processions (including that of Yahweh in Zech 14).

lording it over others, but rather in service. As Hans Leander astutely observes, the entry scene is ‘a parodic undermining of imperial notions of power’.<sup>51</sup>

Similar themes emerge in the procession to the cross (Mk 15.20b-27). Once again, things start with a conscription scene (this time carried out by the soldiers). Elements of kingship are much more muted, but as we have seen are not entirely lacking. T. E. Schmidt detects links to the Roman Triumph in a number of apparently inconsequential details throughout the text: the gathering of the whole cohort (mimicking the assembly of the praetorian guard in Rome); the name Golgotha (where the mention of a skull evokes the Capitoline Hill); the refusal of myrrhed wine (aping the triumphator’s refusal of wine and casting of it upon the altar), and the placement of the central character between two others (lending the scene a sense of ‘enthronement’).<sup>52</sup> Similar to the first procession, Mark parodies

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<sup>51</sup> H. Leander, ‘With Homi Bhabha at the Jerusalem City Gates: A Postcolonial Reading of the ‘Triumphal’ Entry (Mark 11.1-11)’, *JSNT* 32 (2010), pp.309-335 (323).

<sup>52</sup> T. E. Schmidt, ‘Mark 15.6-32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession’, *NTS* 41 (1995), pp.1-18. On the triumph, see also L. Bonfante Warren, ‘Roman Triumphs and Etruscan Kings: The Changing Face of the Triumph’, *JRS* 60 (1970), pp.49-66; H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development, and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009). Christ had been understood as triumphator prior to Mark – cf. 2 Cor. 2.14. Schmidt’s overall case has much to recommend it - particularly if Mark’s gospel was written in Rome shortly after the war of 66-70 CE, when the victorious triumph of Vespasian and his sons was still fresh in the memory of his audience. Yet we should beware of pushing details in the narrative too rigidly into an extraneous template; we cannot be sure that Mark’s audience were familiar with the details of the triumph (even if they were located in the capital city). More likely, the evangelist has chosen broader kingship motifs at this point, some

and subverts normal expectations: the mock triumph ends not with the triumphator's victorious sacrifice, but with his own death. Once again, conventional ideas of power and kingship, even glory and shame, are turned on their heads. Together, both processions play with the idea of Roman power, destabilising its meaning and putting in its place highly subversive ways of what it means to be 'King of the Jews'.

Simon's story, it seems to me, needs to be read as part of the soldiers' mockery of the kingly pretender. He takes his place in a brutal burlesque of a kingly procession, which extends from Jesus' first appearance in the barracks all the way to the place of execution. On the level of the narrative, the mocking soldiers put together a tableau in which Jesus (now in his own clothes<sup>53</sup>) is treated with mock respect. Schmidt suggests that the Cyrenian represents the official who walked besides the sacrificial bull in the triumphal procession,

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linked to the triumph, others linked to Hellenistic or imperial kingship more broadly. Mark's intention presumably was not to map Jesus onto one particular type of kingship, but to evoke regal ideas more broadly, and to invite contrasts and comparisons.

<sup>53</sup> Historically, it seems very unlikely that the soldiers would have bothered to reclothe Jesus. Victims were crucified naked: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 769.2; Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.270; so also T. D. Barnes, "'Another shall gird thee.'" Probative Evidence for the Death of Peter', in H. K. Bond and L. W. Hurtado (eds), *Peter and Earliest Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2015, forthcoming). J. J. Collins suggested that Jesus was allowed to keep his clothes on as a concession to Jewish modesty ('The Archaeology of the Crucifixion', *CBQ* 1 [1939], pp.154-9 [158]), a suggestion followed by Brown, *Death*, 2.953 and Marcus, *Mark*, p.1040. More likely, Mark is adding dignity to Jesus and preparing for the soldiers game of lots in 15.24, beginning the links with LXX Ps. 21 (which would make little sense if Jesus' clothes had been left behind in the barracks).

carrying a double-bladed axe over his shoulder, ‘the instrument of the victim’s death’.<sup>54</sup> However, this seems to be too specific, and too tied to one particular kingly pageant (the triumph). More likely, in my view, Simon is cast as a lictor, the attendant who went before a magistrate (whether a consul, proconsul, praetor, or lower dignitary), carrying a *fascēs* over his left shoulder, a large double-headed axe bound to a bundle of rods, which symbolised the magistrate’s *imperium*. Originally the King was proceeded by a line of twelve lictors (as was the Emperor), lower officials had fewer lictors as befitted their rank.<sup>55</sup> Lictors went everywhere that the magistrate went, even wearing the same clothes as he did, presumably in an effort to enhance his presence and to highlight his power. Only when the magistrate went into a house would the lictors part company with him, remaining outside with their *fascēs* propped up against the wall as a symbol of his presence.<sup>56</sup> Representations of lictors with their characteristic *fascēs* are commonly found on coins and inscriptions and would have been a frequent sight in Roman cities. As M. Horster notes:

During the empire, the *fascēs* seem to have become such popular symbols of outstanding power they were often presented on funerary reliefs of magistrates of the cities or municipal priests of the imperial cult, even if these men had

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<sup>54</sup> Schmidt, ‘Roman Triumphal Procession.’ He argues, too, that Mark saw Simon’s role as ‘divinely planned’, though the evidence for this seems weak.

<sup>55</sup> On the King, see Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.8. Domitian increased his lictors to twenty-four.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the role of lictors, see B. Gladigow, ‘Die sakralen Funktionen der Likatoren. Zum Problem von institutioneller Macht und sakraler Präsentation’, in H. Temporini (ed.), *ANRW* I.2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), pp.295-313.



lictors only on special occasions or were not allowed to have as many *fascēs* as were depicted on their funerary reliefs.<sup>57</sup>

So immediately recognisable were the lictors as symbols of authority and power that when the Alexandrian mob dressed up Carabas in the passage already mentioned, they positioned two young men with rods (ῥάβδους) over their shoulders on either side of the mock King to act as his attendants.<sup>58</sup> The Greek word used here, ῥάβδοι, is the very word used to denote the lictor's *fascēs* in Greek literature.<sup>59</sup>

Simon's crossbeam, then, could have easily evoked the *fascēs*, and the image of Simon going before Jesus in the procession might well have called to mind that of a lictor going before a high official. It is true that Mark does not specify the order in which the two men progressed, though the sentence structure suggests that Simon took the lead.<sup>60</sup> The tableau created a sense

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<sup>57</sup> M. Horster, 'Living on Religion: Professionals and Personnel', in J. Rüpke, *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p.334.

<sup>58</sup> Philo, *Flaccus*, 38. Visually, the *fascēs* seem to have been around 1-2 m in length (their depiction on coins and funerary monuments differs quite substantially). The crossbeam would presumably be longer than this, though its exact weight and dimensions would vary depending on the region and the type of wood used; see M. W. Madlen and P. D. Mitchell, 'Medical Theories on the Cause of Death in Crucifixion', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99 (2006), pp.185-8.

<sup>59</sup> Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Abridged Version (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.621.

<sup>60</sup> Perhaps in an attempt to depict Simon as an example of discipleship, Luke is careful to note that Simon went *behind* Jesus (Lk. 23.26).

of mock-honour, authority and power. From the point of view of the soldiers, it was a perfect way to lampoon the ridiculous claims of the would-be King of the Jews, and a natural manner to continue the mockery begun in Mk 15.16-20. The lictor quite appropriately takes his place when Jesus emerges into public, outside the barracks. Read in this way, Simon is not a disciple but rather an unwilling helper in the soldiers' gruesome procession to the cross.<sup>61</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Simon was never made into a saint by the Christian church – and with good reason. On the most basic level of the Markan narrative, he is not a disciple. He is conscripted into the crucifixion scene to parade the helpless prisoner to his place of execution. He is part of the soldiers' brutal mockery, their spoof procession with the Jewish 'king' to the cross. And yet for those with eyes to see, he forms part of the triumphal procession, carrying the cross of the Son of God, the symbol of God's victory over the forces of evil. If this reading has any merit, it is not Simon who provides a model of discipleship for readers, as centuries of church and cultural tradition have tended to suggest. Instead, it is Jesus himself who paves the way for those who would be called on to lay down their lives in the future.

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<sup>61</sup> J. Gnllka suggests that Simon acts as the king's servant here, but it is an idea he does not develop; *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Mk 8,27-16,20) (Zürich: Benziger, 1979), p.315.